

Post Primary Support Team
Department of Education
Rathgael House
43 Baloo Road
Bangor
BT19 7PR

Dear Sir or Madam,

CONSULTATION ON PROPOSAL FOR A DRAFT EDUCATION (NORTHERN IRELAND) ORDER

The Young Farmer's Clubs of Ulster is a youth organisation with about 2000 members between the ages of 12-25. The organisation is run by members for members. As such, we welcome the opportunity to provide our views on the above draft order.

1. Principles and Objectives

In particular we agree with the Ulster Farmers' Union that the new admission arrangements should be 'fair and free from any bias or indirect discrimination against particular groups or individuals' however we do feel that as it stands, some elements of the proposal will disadvantage rural children therefore not corresponding with this objective/principle.

This is unacceptable and the YFCU emphasize the importance that the Education Order recognises and accommodates needs of the rural community and farming families and feels it is essential that a rural proofing exercise is completed.

2. Pupil Profile

Along with the UFU we support the principle of parents having as much information as possible about their child's education however we are concerned that the development of a pupil profile may lead to disagreements between parents and teachers- teachers may face excessive pressure from parents to give favourable results. In Rural Areas teachers are often part of the community and frequently teach the same children for a number of years so disputes with parents could make their job very difficult. There is concern that the development of pupil profiles will increase the workload of teachers, particularly in rural areas. Already excessive bureaucracy detracts from the time they devote to lesson planning and teaching.

We would like confirmation that the pupil profile should not be used as a tool by post primary schools to admit children, as this would put unnecessary burden on primary schools and leave the system open to abuse.

3. Admissions Criteria

The YFCU feel this is the most critical element of the new Education Order in determining equality for all and will comment when the impending changes are made. However we would ask for consideration of the following points.

- The department must consider demographics of people. The urban population can easily move into a catchment area of a desirable school however, this is not the case for people in rural areas who are often tied to their business.

- The YFCU stress that the use of geographical criteria is totally unacceptable. This criterion would not allow for children to attend their most suitable school in terms of the Entitlement Framework. Rural children should be made a special case as post-primary schools are sparser and usually involve extra travelling (often not allowing them to take part in after school activities) thus they don't have the same level of choice as urban children. No matter how much flexibility a school is given to reflect their local circumstances rural children will still be disadvantaged. These special circumstances must be considered and the needs of rural children must be met and given the same opportunities as urban children. The YFCU feel that NI could be zoned so that postcodes could be allocated to their closest post primary school. All children whose postcodes fall within the same zone should be treated on an equal basis regardless of whether they live 1 or 10 miles away from the school so that rural children will not be discriminated against.

4. Entitlement Framework

The YFCU supports the theory however we are concerned about how this will work in reality, we continue to support the proposal of increased co-operation between schools providing that funding is provided for the associated administration.

The proposal that pupils may move between neighbouring schools to allow them greater access to courses is in theory acceptable but impractical in rural areas. At present 48% of Northern Ireland's population live in rural areas. Pupils from rural areas will not have feasible access to the Entitlement Framework. In reality, rural schools may not be able to offer the required number of subjects for 'entitlement framework' forcing them to close or pupils may be forced to travel longer distances.

Already many Principals of rural schools are highly concerned as to how they will manage 24 subjects at Key Stage 3 and 27 subjects at post 16 when their teaching staff are already stretched.

The Costello Proposal of bussing pupils between Collegiate Schools would only mean that rural children would lose out on classroom teaching time and there would also be insurance implications where transportation between school sites would be necessary.

The YFCU believe that charging fees for DARD courses of education is acceptable so long as they are commensurable with those charged by other colleges of Further and Higher Education, hence avoiding any disadvantage to those students wishing to pursue an agricultural career